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Bernard Cornwell. *Waterloo: The History of Four Days, Three Armies, and Three Battles*. HarperCollins: New York, 2015.

Book Review

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Americans might confuse Waterloo with Gettysburg, the critical battle of our American Civil War. However, the comparison is simply not valid at almost any level except that both battles were blood baths. Gettysburg was another one of those battles that was unable to bring closure to the American Civil War. Waterloo ended the era of Napoleon, changing the course of history. Indeed it closed the book on what was perhaps the first European Civil War until nearly one hundred years later. Bernard Cornwell, renowned for his works of historical fiction, ventures into new territory here with this nonfiction account of the eighteenth day of June 1815. Make no mistake about it; Cornwell is a military historian who has a good feel for the battlefield. Waterloo seems simply another vehicle for him to do his magic, weave tales, and bring history to life—but here Cornwell creates his take faithfully out of the whole cloth of solid scholarship, crafting perhaps the standard for future popular works on Waterloo.

Cornwell does not move much beyond the accepted limits of the standard history of the battle. There are controversies that swirl about this battle, particularly concerning the last half-hour and who should be credited with striking the decisive blow for the British. Cornwell, to his credit, side steps that issue as it would have made his work less accessible to the general public. Instead, Cornwell tells the story of the Waterloo Campaign. He spends very little time on what is called the Hundred Days Campaign. The story really begins with the grand ball in Brussels on the evening of June 15, 1815. Yet Cornwell does not solely focus on Waterloo but pays due attention to the battles of Ligny and Quatre Bras and their impact on Waterloo.

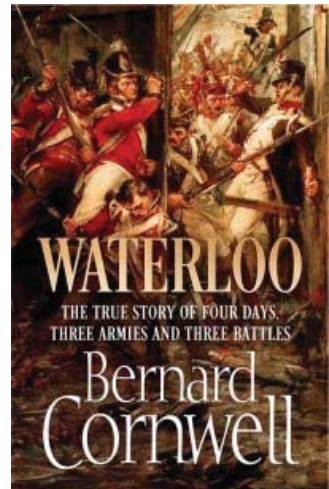


Figure 1 Cover art, used by permission.

So why another book on Waterloo? Unless Cornwell uncovered new archival material, is it not unlike a movie on the Titanic—you know the ending. This is where Cornwell's craft comes in. Through much of the book, Cornwell used present tense to build a suspenseful tale. This convention, known as the historical present, may set the teeth on edge of more traditionalist military history aficionados. Cornwell is not writing for them, however. Moreover, the chosen vignettes employed—and the book is replete with those from both sides—gives readers the feel of almost a military after action report. The tone and style makes it feel fresh and not a story from two hundred years ago. Cornwell's style imparts a sense of drama that with his pacing makes this a new story for the reader.

Throughout the book, Cornwell raises a series of interesting issues, without ever getting mired in controversy. He allows the reader to judge how much credit the Prussians deserve in the end for the Allied victory at Waterloo, and he damns with faint praise almost all the French leadership, from Napoleon to Marshal Michel Ney. Perhaps the only French leader who truly escapes censure is Marshal Emmanuel de Grouchy, who like General Lew Wallace at Shiloh, was perhaps a bit dilatory in moving to the sounds of the guns. Yet Cornwell carefully examines the historic evidence of the orders Napoleon sent to Grouchy, allowing the reader to see that Grouchy had multiple sets of conflicting orders. Cornwell though did not extend his analysis deeper, which is perhaps the one failing of sorts with this otherwise delightful book. Here was a perfect example of how ossified the French command structure had become under Napoleon that his Marshals were only tools to execute and not battlefield commanders in their own right. The Prussian story revolves around two men, specifically Marshal Gebhard von Blücher and General Augustus von Gneisenau, with a third often mentioned who left a greater intellectual impact than either—Clausewitz. The World War I German High Seas Fleet even named Battle Cruisers after the first two individuals. Cornwell indirectly places much of the credit for the ultimate victory on Blücher's shoulders, with his single-minded determination to annihilate Napoleon. Blücher was driven by the desire to avenge his homeland of Prussia's humiliations suffered through Napoleon's utter defeat of the Prussian Army and the subsequent French Army occupation of Prussia in 1806.

Yet on balance, Cornwell achieves his objective, a distinguished popular account of Waterloo. Cornwell also, one must suspect with processor in hand, tells his reader some of the more popular and apocryphal tales of Waterloo. While mounted beside Wellington at the end of the battle, a solid shot cannonball carried off Lord Uxbridge's leg. Cornwell notes the supposed exchange, which is oh, so

upper class British:

Uxbridge to Wellington upon realization he had been severely wounded:

“By God, sir, I’ve lost my leg!”

Wellington's reply was: “By God, sir, so you have!”

Cornwell also speaks to the various myths surrounding the end of Napoleons' Old Guard. Dependent upon what version suits your view of history, the Old Guard providing rear security pulled itself into a square. Popular accounts fancy that they were either all killed like the Spartans at Thermopylae after asserting, “The Guard Dies but never surrenders” or more bluntly “Merde.” For the vast majority of readers, Cornwell brings sense and context to this immense battle, the likes of which would not be seen again until the mass armies of World War One—but never again would the world see such a charnel house as was this one day in Belgium.

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Our reviewer: LTC Robert G. Smith graduated from Juniata College with a BS in Poli Sci cum laude. LTC Smith attended the Pennsylvania State University, receiving his MA(cum laude) in American Military History in 1982, and a Juris Doctorate in 1992 from West Virginia University. LTC Smith has served in the capacity of an armor officer, logistician, military intelligence and engineer officer. He is a graduate of the Armor Basic Course, the Armor Advanced Course, Command and General Staff College and Army Combined Arms Staff College and the Advanced Joint Professional Military Course in Joint Warfare. (He is currently suffering through Air War College). After 9/11 he was recalled to active duty, serving as the lead Army military historian at the US Army Center of Military History for the attack on the Pentagon. He has subsequently served as the Vth Corps historian for the initial invasion of Iraq and in the Deputy Directorate of Special Operation (DDSO) on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. While on the DDSO he wrote a highly classified study on SOF in the Global War on Terror. He was the CoS of the Army one man GWOT record collector, tasked to collect all the lost records. In 3 years he collected 7 1/2 TB of records. In addition he served as the Deputy Command Historian at CENTCOM. He was appointed as a Kentucky Colonel by the Governor of Kentucky in 2010. He currently is in the Army Wounded Warrior Program.